

# Meet the God of Encouragement

## Introduction

*Has it been a while since you stared at the heavens in speechless amazement? Has it been a while since you realized God's divinity and your carnality?*

*If it has, then you need to know something. He is still there. He hasn't left. Under all those papers and books and reports and years. In the midst of all those voices and faces and memories and pictures, he is still there.*

*Do yourself a favor. Stand before him again. Or, better, allow him to stand before you. Go into your upper room and wait. Wait until he comes. And when he appears, don't leave. Run your fingers over his feet. Place your hand in the pierced side. And look into those eyes. Those same eyes that melted the gates of hell and sent the demons scurrying and Satan running. Look at them as they look at you. You'll never be the same.*

*A man is never the same after he simultaneously sees his utter despair and Christ's unbending grace.*

*To see the despair without the grace is suicidal. To see the grace without the despair is upper room futility. But to see them both is conversion.*

*Come meet the God of encouragement. He loves you. He never gives up on you, especially when life is hard, because he has been there. The hand that reaches out to comfort you is a pierced one.*

# God Never Gives Up

*How do I know God is with me? What if this is all a hoax?*

*How do you know that is God who is speaking?*

The thick and dreadful darkness of doubt. The same darkness you feel when you sit on a polished pew in a funeral chapel and listen to the obituary of the one you love more than life.

The same darkness that you feel when you hear the words, "The tumor is malignant. We have to operate."

The same darkness that falls upon you when you realize you just lost your temper... again. The same darkness you feel when you realize that the divorce you never wanted is final.

The same darkness into which Jesus screamed, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Appropriate words. For when we doubt, God seems very far away.

Which is exactly why he chose to draw so near.

Throughout time, though God's people often forgot their God, God didn't forget them. He kept his word.

God didn't give up. He never gives up. When Joseph was dropped into a pit by his own brothers, God didn't give up.

When Moses said, "Here I am, send Aaron," God didn't give up.

When the delivered Israelites wanted Egyptian slavery instead of milk and honey, God didn't give up.

When Aaron was making a false god at the very moment Moses was with the true God, God didn't give up.

When only two of the ten spies thought the Creator was powerful enough to deliver the created, God didn't give up.

When Samson whispered to Delilah, when Saul roared after David, when David schemed against Uriah, God didn't give up.

When God's word lay forgotten and man's idols stood glistening, God didn't give up.

When the children of Israel were taken into captivity God didn't give up.

He could have given up. He could have turned his back. He could have walked away from the wretched mess, but he didn't.

He didn't give up.

When he became flesh and was the victim of an assassination attempt before he was two years old, he didn't give up.

When the people from his own home town tried to push him over a cliff; he didn't give up.

When his brothers ridiculed him, he didn't give up.

When he was accused of blaspheming God by people who didn't fear God, he didn't give up.

When Peter worshiped him at the supper and cursed him at the fire, he didn't give up.

When people spat in his face, he didn't spit back. When the bystanders slapped him, he didn't slap them. When a whip ripped his sides, he didn't turn and command the awaiting angels to stuff that whip down that soldier's throat.

And when human hands fastened the divine hands to a cross with spikes, it wasn't the soldiers who held the hands of Jesus steady. It was God who held them steady. For those wounded hands were the same invisible hands that had carried the firepot and the torch two thousand years earlier. They were the same hands that had brought light into Abram's thick and dreadful darkness. They had come to do it again.

So, the next time doubt walks in, escort him out. Out to the hill. Out to Calvary. Out to the cross where, with holy blood, the hand that carried the flame wrote the promise, "God would give up his only son before he'd give up on you."

## Chapter 2

# Question for the Canyon's Edge

*"How was the night?" asked the nurse. The young man's weary eyes answered the question before his lips could. It had been long and hard Vigils always are.*

*But even more so when they are with your own father.*

*"He didn't wake up."*

*The son sat by the bed and held the bony hand that had so often held his own. He was afraid to release it for fear that doing so might allow the man he so dearly loved to tumble over the brink. He had held it all night as the two stood on the canyon's edge, aware of the final step that was only hours away.*

*With word's painted black with confusion, he summarized the fears that had been his companions during the darkness. "I know it has to happen," the son yearned, looking at his father's ashen face; "I just don't know why."*

*The canyon of death.*

*It is a desolate canyon. The dry ground is cracked and lifeless. A blistering sun heats the wind that moans eerily and stings mercilessly. Tears burn and words come slowly as visitors to the canyon are forced to stare into the ravine. The bottom of the crevice is invisible, the other side unreachable. You can't help but wonder what is hidden in the darkness. And you can't help but long to leave.*

*Have you been there? Have you been called to stand at the thin line that separates the living from the dead? Have you lain awake at night listening to machines pumping air in and out of your lungs? Have you watched sickness corrode and atrophy the body of a friend? Have you lingered behind at the cemetery long after the others have left, gazing in disbelief at the metal casket that contains the body that contained the soul of the one you can't believe is gone?*

*If so, then this canyon is not unfamiliar to you. You've heard the lonesome whistle of the winds. You've heard the painful questions Why? What for? ricochet answerless off the canyon walls. And you've kicked loose rocks off the edge and listened for the sound of their crashing, which never comes.*

*The young father crushed the cigarette into the plastic ashtray He was alone in the hospital waiting room. How long will it take? It all had happened so quickly! First came the news from the hospital, then the frantic drive to the emergency room and then the explanation of the nurse. "Your son was hit by a car. He has some serious head wounds. He is in surgery The doctors are doing the best they can."*

*Another cigarette. 'My God. "The words of the father were almost inaudible. "He's only five years old."*

*Standing on the edge of the canyon draws all of life into perspective. What matters and what doesn't are easily distinguished. Above the canyon wall no one is concerned about salaries or positions. No one asks about the car you drive or what part of town you live in. As aging humans stand beside this ageless chasm, all the games and disguises of life seem sadly silly.*

*It happened in one fiery instant.*

*"Where is the bird?" shouted a space engineer at Cape Canaveral.*

*"Oh, my God "cried a teacher from the viewing stands nearby. "Don't let happen what I think just happened" Confusion and horror raced through the nation as we stood on the edge of the canyon watching seven of our best disintegrate before our eyes as the shuttle exploded into a white and orange fireball.*

*Once again we were reminded that even at our technological finest, we are still frighteningly frail.*

*It is possible that I'm addressing someone who is walking the canyon wall. Someone you love dearly has been called into the unknown and you are alone. Alone with your fears and alone with your doubts. If this is the case, please read the rest of this piece very carefully. Look carefully at the scene described in John 11.*

*In this scene there are two people: Martha and Jesus. And for all practical purposes they are the only two people in the universe.*

*Her words were full of despair. "If you had been here. . ." She stares into the Master's face with confused eyes.*

She'd been strong long enough; now it hurt too badly. Lazarus was dead. Her brother was gone. And the one man who could have made a difference didn't. He hadn't even made it for the burial. Something about death makes us accuse God of betrayal. "If God were here there would be no death!" we claim.

You see, if God is God anywhere, he has to be God in the face of death. Pop psychology can deal with depression. Pep talks can deal with pessimism. Prosperity can handle hunger. But only God can deal with our ultimate dilemma—death. And only the God of the Bible has dared to stand on the canyon's edge and offer an answer. He has to be God in the face of death. If not, he is not God anywhere.

Jesus wasn't angry at Martha. Perhaps it was his patience that caused her to change her tone from frustration to earnestness. "Even now God will give you whatever you ask"

Jesus then made one of those claims that place him either on the throne or in the asylum: "Your brother will rise again."

Martha misunderstood. (Who wouldn't have?) "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

That wasn't what Jesus meant. Don't miss the context of the next words. Imagine the setting: Jesus has intruded on the enemy's turf; he's standing in Satan's territory Death Canyon. His stomach turns as he smells the sulfuric stench of the ex-angel, and he winces as he hears the oppressed wails of those trapped in the prison. Satan has been here. He has violated one of God's creations.

With his foot planted on the serpent's head, Jesus speaks loudly enough that his words echo off the canyon walls.

"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." (John 11:25).

It is a hinge point in history. A chink has been found in death's armor. The keys to the halls of hell have been claimed. The buzzards scatter and the scorpions scurry as Life confronts death—and wins! The wind stops. A cloud blocks the sun and a bird chirps in the distance while a humiliated snake slithers between the rocks and disappears into the ground.

The stage has been set for a confrontation at Calvary.

But Jesus isn't through with Martha. With eyes locked on hers he asks the greatest question found in Scripture, a question meant as much for you and me as for Martha.

"Do you believe this?"

Wham! There it is. The bottom line. The dimension that separates Jesus from a thousand gurus and prophets who have come down the pike. The question that drives any responsible listener to absolute obedience to or total rejection of the Christian faith.

"Do you believe this?"

Let the question sink into your heart for a minute. Do you believe that a young, penniless itinerant is larger than your death? Do you truly believe that death is nothing more than an entrance ramp to a new highway?

"Do you believe this?"

Jesus didn't pose this query as a topic for discussion in Sunday schools. It was never intended to be dealt with while basking in the stained glass sunlight or while seated on padded pews.

No. This is a canyon question. A question which makes sense only during an all-night vigil or in the stillness of smoke-filled waiting rooms. A question that makes sense when all of our props, crutches, and costumes are taken away. For then we must face ourselves as we really are: rudderless humans tailspinning toward disaster. And we are forced to see him for what he claims to be: our only hope.

As much out of desperation as inspiration, Martha said yes. As she studied the tan face of that Galilean carpenter, something told her she'd probably never get closer to the truth than she was right now. So she gave him her hand and let him lead her away from the canyon wall.

"I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this?"

## The God of the Broken-Hearted

The fog of the broken heart. It's a dark fog that slyly imprisons the soul and refuses easy escape. It's a silent mist that eclipses the sun and beckons the darkness. It's a heavy cloud that honors no hour and respects no person. Depression, discouragement, disappointment, doubt... all are companions of this dreaded presence.

The fog of the broken heart disorients our life. It makes it hard to see the road. Dim your lights. Wipe off the windshield. Slow down. Do what you wish, nothing helps. When this fog encircles us, our vision is blocked and tomorrow is a forever away. When this billowy blackness envelops us, the most earnest words of help and hope are but vacant phrases.

If you have ever been betrayed by a friend, you know what I mean. If you have ever been dumped by a spouse or abandoned by a parent, you have seen this fog. If you have ever placed a spade of dirt on a loved one's casket or kept vigil at a dear one's bedside, you, too, recognize this cloud.

If you have been in this fog, or are in it now, you can be sure of one thing—you are not alone. Even the saltiest of sea captains have lost their bearings because of the appearance of this unwanted cloud. Like the comedian said, 'If broken hearts were commercials, we'd all be on TV.'

Think back over the last two or three months. How many broken hearts did you encounter? How many wounded spirits did you witness? How many stories of tragedy did you read about?

My own reflection is sobering:

The woman who lost her husband and son in a freak car wreck

The attractive mother of three who was abandoned by her husband.

The child who was hit and killed by a passing garbage truck as he was getting off the school bus. His mother, who was waiting for him, witnessed the tragedy.

The parents who found their teenager dead in the forest behind their home. He had hung himself from a tree with his own belt.

The list goes on and on, doesn't it? Foggy tragedies. How they blind our vision and destroy our dreams. Forget any great hopes of reaching the world. Forget any plans of changing society. Forget any aspirations of moving mountains. Forget all that. Just help me make it through the night!

The suffering of the broken heart.

Go with me for a moment to witness what was perhaps the foggiest night in history. The scene is very simple; you'll recognize it quickly. A grove of twisted olive trees. Ground cluttered with large rocks. A low stone fence. A dark, dark night.

Now, look into the picture. Look closely through the shadowy foliage. See that person? See that solitary figure? What's he doing? Flat on the ground. Face stained with dirt and tears. Fists pounding the hard earth. Eyes wide with a stupor of fear. Hair matted with salty sweat. Is that blood on his forehead?

That's Jesus. Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Maybe you've seen the classic portrait of Christ in the garden. Kneeling beside a big rock. Snow-white robe. Hands peacefully folded in prayer. A look of serenity on his face. Halo over his head. A spotlight from heaven illuminating his golden-brown hair.

Now, I'm no artist, but I can tell you one thing. The man who painted that picture didn't use the gospel of Mark as a pattern. Look what Mark wrote about that painful night.

When they reached a place called Gethsemane, he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." And he took Peter and James and John with him. Horror and dismay came over him, and he said to them, "My heart is ready to break with grief, stop here, and stay awake." Then he went forward a little, threw himself on the ground, and prayed that, if it were possible, this hour might pass him by. "Abba, Father," he said, "all things

are possible to thee; take this cup away from me. Yet not what I will, but what thou wilt.”

He came back and found them asleep; and he said to Peter, “Asleep, Simon? Were you not able to stay awake for one hour? Stay awake, all of you; and pray that you may be spared the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” Once more he went away and prayed. On his return he found them asleep again, for their eyes were heavy; and they did not know how to answer him.

The third time he came and said to them, “Still sleeping? Still taking your ease? Enough! The hour has come.

The Son of Man is betrayed to sinful men. Up, let us go forward! My betrayer is upon us.”

Look at those phrases. “*Horror* and *dismay* came over him.” “My heart is ready to *break* with grief.” “He went a little forward and *threw* himself on the ground.”

Does this look like the picture of a saintly Jesus resting in the palm of God? Hardly. Mark used black paint to describe this scene. We see an agonizing, straining, and struggling Jesus. We see “a man of sorrows.”<sup>2</sup> We see a man struggling with fear, wrestling with commitments, and yearning for relief.

We see Jesus in the fog of a broken heart. The writer of Hebrews would later pen, “During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death.”<sup>3</sup>

My, what a portrait! Jesus is in pain. Jesus is on the stage of fear. Jesus is cloaked, not in sainthood, but in humanity.

The next time the fog finds you, you might do well to remember Jesus in the garden. The next time you think that no one understands, reread the fourteenth chapter of Mark. The next time your self-pity convinces you that no one cares, pay a visit to Gethsemane. And the next time you wonder if God really perceives the pain that prevails on this dusty planet, listen to him pleading among the twisted trees.

Here’s my point. Seeing God like this does wonders for our own suffering. God was never more human than at this hour. God was never nearer to us than when he hurt. The Incarnation was never so fulfilled as in the garden.

As a result, time spent in the fog of pain could be God’s greatest gift. It could be the hour that we finally see our Maker. If it is true that in suffering God is most like man, maybe in our suffering we can see God like never before.

The next time you are called to suffer, pay attention. It may be the closest you’ll ever get to God. Watch closely. It could very well be that the hand that extends itself to lead you out of the fog is a pierced one.

1 Mark 14:32-42 2 Isaiah 53:3 ~ Hebrews 5:7, italics mine.

# Study Guide

## Chapter 1: God Never Gives Up

Read 2 Timothy 2:8-13

1. One good way to combat doubt is to remember what things are essential. What does Paul ask Timothy to “remember” in verse 8? How is this essential?
2. Verse 11 promises that we will live with Christ if we “died with him.” What does it mean to “die with him”? How do you do that?
3. What warning is included in verse 12? How does doubt sometimes enter in here? How does Paul’s warning here compare to Jesus’ own words in Luke 12:8-9?
4. What great hope is found in verse 13? Upon what is this hope built?
5. What does it mean to you that God is absolutely faithful?
6. This chapter has listed many times when God did not give up on his people. Think about your own life. Can you recall times when you were unfaithful, but God was faithful to you? Write these down and tell a friend about them.

## Chapter 2: Question for the Canyon’s Edge

1. Only God can deal with our ultimate dilemma— death. And only the God of the Bible has dared to stand on the canyon’s edge and offer an answer. He has to be God in the face of death. If not, he is not God anywhere.
  - A. What does Max mean by “He has to be God in the face of death. If not, he is not God anywhere”? What is the answer to death that God offers? How did he offer the answer?
  - B. Read 1 Corinthians 15:12-28 and restate in your own words Paul’s argument concerning death and resurrection.
  - C. How would you answer someone who questions that Jesus rose from the dead and that there is life after death?
2. Do you believe that a young, penniless itinerant is larger than your death ? Do you truly believe that death is nothing more than an entrance ramp to a new highway?
  - A. Max describes death as an entrance ramp. What other helpful comparisons can you make to explain what death is like?
  - B. What insights do these passages give into the relationship of death to life: Luke 20:34-38; John 11:25-26; Romans 8:10-11?
  - C. What would you *say* to someone facing death that would help the person see God’s answer?

## Chapter 3: The God of the Broken-Hearted

1. Seeing God like this does wonders for our own suffering. God was never more human than at this hour. God was never nearer to us than when he hurt.
  - A. How does it help to understand that Jesus in his humanity suffered in the Garden of Gethsemane?
  - B. Reread the account in Mark 14:32-42 or in one of the other Gospels. What about Jesus’ behavior seems very “human” to you? What about these events is surprising?
  - C. If this were the only passage available to a non-Christian, what basic principles of the gospel could be taught

from it? In what way can this passage serve as an example and as encouragement when you pray amidst the “fog”?

2. If it is true that in suffering God is most like man, maybe in our suffering we can see God like never before.

A. In times of suffering is your vision of God better or worse? Under what circumstances do you turn to God? Under what circumstances do you turn away from him?

B. How do the following passages assure us that God not only understands but cares about our sufferings: Matthew 10:28-31; John 14:1-3; Romans 8:28-39?

C. How can times of suffering ultimately be a blessing? Read 2 Corinthians 4:7—5:11; 2 Thessalonians 1:3-10; and Luke 6:20-22.

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